

G, C, E, A.

Walani thumbed through the notes again in reverse order.

A, E, C, G.

Not bad for an instrument that'd been sitting around in an abandoned trunk floating on the sea for who knew how long.

It'd been a while but her fingers still remembered their places on the neck of the ukulele. She got to strumming. The campfire was crackling and hot on her shins. By its light she could just see the silhouette of her new friend darting all over the beach.

Walani tried strumming in tune to Willow's frantic movements, but the result was a little too manic for her tastes. She slowed down. It was getting dark. Should she call Willow back?

The fire would bring her in.

And it did. Willow followed it like a tide, sitting close to it, building it up until it was a little too hot for comfort. "Find anything to eat?" Walani asked.

"Just more snails. You could always go look."

"Snails are good with me." She dug her toes into the sand. Willow had not taken off her shoes. So far she never had. Of course, Walani had only known her a couple days. She seemed so tense, though. Maybe a tune on the uke would cheer her up.

"Somewhere over the rainbow... way up high..."

"I've never seen a rainbow here," said Willow.

Walani rolled her eyes. "You wanna make a request then?"

"Mmmm. Nah. You play what you want, I guess. I'll cook the snails."

Walani started toying with an improvised uke version of Smells Like Teen Spirit. "Thanks for finding this," she said.

"Uh huh."

With music, a campfire, beach sand, the sound of the waves, the smell of the sizzling limpets, it all seemed alright. This wasn't such a bad place to be stuck. She could think of it like a long vacation. And she wasn't even alone anymore.

Willow had a piece of paper in her hand and was musing over it. Walani didn't ask about it. Either Willow would share or she wouldn't. That was how it went with her.

"So," Willow said. She'd decided to share. There's a really big island..."

She held up the piece of paper. It had a lot of little crossed-out circles on it and one big circle. "And there are other people on it. We've got a little camp."

This was news. The music hesitated a moment before Walani shrugged it off and continued to strum, but more quietly. Willow must've been vetting her out these past couple days before deciding to spill the beans. That was reasonable. Stranger danger, and all.

"Other people? How many?"

Willow hesitated. "Nine," she said. Nine. Well. It was better than being alone, that was for sure.

Willow stared into the fire. "It used to be ten,"she said. "That's why I'm here. One of our guys went missing."

Walani's fingers paused on the strings. The sound of the last chord she'd played faded out. 'Sorry.'

Willow shrugged and tossed her pigtails. "If he wants to run off and get lost that's his problem."

But her eyes were bright. All those bones everywhere. Had one set of them been Willow's friend?

Walani remembered one evening when she'd gotten a little less than chill about being alone, and she'd bent one skeleton's arm so that it was posthumously picking its nose. That wasn't a super cool thing to have done. Those were people.

"One day I'm going to find the guy who brought us all here,"said Willow. "And he'll be sorry."

Walani thought again of the skeletons. "Count me in, sister."

She struck up a new tune, a jangly war tune.

Willow sat hunched over with her elbows on her knees, rubbing her hands together. "I'm going to smash his stupid face in." She looked up. "How'd he get you?"

Ah, it was good to have an excuse to tell a story. Willow seemed skittish, and being open with stuff was the best way to earn her trust. Walani toned down the uke. Story-backdrop music. "So I'm between jobs. Got laid off." She closed her eyes. She could picture it all clearly, in weird dreamlike colors. "I'm out with my board and the surf's going off and-" She sighed. "I wish I could stay out there forever. So I'm in a lull, right, and I look up and there's this dude on a board, sitting there in the water, came out of nowhere. And he's all dressed to the nines in this three-piece suit. On his board. Like something out of a mobster movie, you know?"

Willow nodded. "Like he's hot stuff."

“Uh-huh. So he's sitting there on the board, in a suit, in the ocean, and he waves to me. And I go ‘hang loose’ and he goes: ‘Nice day for this, isn't it?’ And he had a little bit of a British accent, but it almost sounded fake. Like someone from an old movie. Anyway, I said ‘you should have been here yesterday.’ And he goes, ‘it's a shame you have to stop, isn't it?’ and I'm like ‘you're tellin’ me.’ He says ‘well, I’ll let you in on a little secret,’ and he points out to sea. He says ‘go that way. You won't have to find a job and you'll never have to come in from the ocean again.’ And it sounds like baloney, but this guy showed up out of nowhere and he looks like a little leprechaun or something, so I'm like ‘sure, dude.’ And I start paddling a little ways. To humor him. He starts kind of smirking. I get caught in an undertow. At least that's what I thought happened. It felt like someone was pulling me under by the ankles. Maybe there was someone. Next thing I know, I'm here, and some mangy parrot is dissing me.”

Willow stared distantly into the fire. Walani had expected her to get angry, maybe, rail against the kidnapper, blow off a little steam. But she looked kind of defeated. “You called him little? He was short?”

“Yeah.”

“What did he look like?” Willow asked.

Walani could see his face in her mind's eye clear as day. She took a moment to think of how to describe it, strumming idly on the uke. She said: "He was a white guy. He had kind of a bummed out look. Looked super tired. Bags under his eyes. Dark eyes, I think. He had this wild hair. Looked like maybe he'd been surfing into the wind, but y'know, I don't think he really surfs."

Willow looked at her map again. She tipped it into the fire and brushed her hands together like she was cleaning dust off them. "I had a different guy," she said.